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The Sir William Luce Memorial Lecture

July 2014

Iranian and Arab in the Gulf: Endangered Language, Windtowers, and Fish Sauce

by

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IGNORED ACHIEVEMENT

Sir William Luce received little recognition for his exceptional work in the shuttle diplomacy and the four-dimensional chess game of 1970-71 that created the arrangements that followed Britain's withdrawal from the Persian Gulf in December 1971. "Herding cats" does not begin to describe Luce's mission. Multiple rounds of shuttle diplomacy involved all the Gulf emirates, Tehran, Riyadh, Baghdad, Cairo, Beirut, Ankara, and Switzerland. There were hundreds of separate meetings, to say nothing of those meetings cancelled or aborted when one or more parties failed to show up.²

An American politician once said that diplomacy is "easy on the brain, but hell on the feet." For Luce, this round was hell on both. For better or worse, others got the credit and the blame. James Buchan for example, in his recent book about Iran, *Days of God*, completely ignores Luce and mentions only Denis Wright and Peter Ramsbothan, UK ambassadors to Tehran between 1969 and 1974.

¹ The author would like to thank Mrs. Jane Hogan, Assistant Keeper, Durham University Library, Professor Martyn Evans, Principal of Trevelyan College, and Professors Emma Murphy and Anoush Ehteshami of the School of Government and International Affairs for their generous assistance and hospitality during the period of the Luce Fellowship. There were many others, too numerous to name, who also gave invaluable assistance.

² M.W. Daly, "2012: Sir William Luce in the Middle East," *Sir William Luce Publication Series* No.12 (Durham: 2012), p. 22. Available online at www.dur.ac.uk/sgia/imeis/lucefund/visiting.

Like many Foreign Service officers at the time in both the British and American systems, those who dealt with Iran (the “Persianists”) and those who dealt with the Arab countries (the “Arabists”) lived in separate worlds. It was rare for someone to know both languages and have experience on both sides of the Persian Gulf or the Zagros Mountains.

Although Sir William had dealt with the Arabic-speaking world since the 1930s, as far as I know this occasion was the first time he had dealt with Iran and Iranians. In his account of Luce’s work, Martin Daly recounts what Luce found on the Iranian side. According to Northcott Ely, the American lawyer representing Sharjah’s interests:

The Shah...was in fact supremely contemptuous of all Arabs. Sir William Luce...told me that when the Shah spoke of Arabs, his lip “curled in scorn”. Luce said that he had read that expression in novels, but had never seen anyone actually curl his lip in scorn. When Luce got home, he tried it front of a mirror and couldn’t do it.³

In what is otherwise an excellent account, however, Buchan ignores Luce, and makes Amb. Denis Wright (1969-71) the main figure in the agreement. Buchan argues that the arrangement was in reality a diplomatic victory for both the Iranians and the British. He writes:

[In 1971] the British exchanged ‘a rock with a few snakes and a few Indians with a lighthouse’ [the islands’ characterisation by Peter Ramsbotham, UK Ambassador to Iran, 1971-74] for a political order on the Arab shore that has survived to this day...Mohammad Reza [Shah] gave up a manufactured claim to Bahrain for the first extension of Iranian territory since Turkmanchay [1828].⁴

Of course this view does not mention the Arabs, who seemed to be left out of the equation.

³ Daly, “2012: Sir William Luce in the Middle East,” p. 24. There is a fictionalized account of this period in Robin Moore’s early 70s trashy and steamy novel *Dubai*. It’s a good read, and those who were in the UAE in the 1970s will recognize many of the characters.

⁴ James Buchan, *Days of God: The Revolution of Iran and Its Consequences* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2012), p. 167.

REALITY AT MANY LEVELS

That Iranian-Arab aversion that Luce encountered in the course of his shuttle diplomacy is real. But it is only part of the truth. What we are dealing with is a mixture of fact, distortion, stereotype, and myth. In a reasonable world, the realities of history, ethnography and geography would be fixed; but in our world they are not. We can take them as our starting point, but the problem is that for every reality, we are almost certain to find counter-reality.

LANGUAGE AND RELIGION

While in American political debate we hear much about a so-called “Iranian threat”, it is not quite clear exactly who is threatening whom. The truth is that history has dealt Iranians a difficult hand. It has separated them from their neighbours in both language and religion. Iranians stand isolated in their region. They are not Sunni Moslems, like almost everyone else in the Islamic world. In language, they are not Arab, like their neighbours to the south and west. Nor are they Turkish, like their neighbours to the north and northwest. Even within Iran, we see a complex mosaic of languages and religions that makes Iran a multi-ethnic empire and Persian, the national language, the mother tongue of no more than half the population. History has made Iranians the Bretons of the Middle East. Both speak a language no one else understands and venerate saints no one else has ever heard of.

TRUE AND MORE TRUE

Iranians are justly proud of their imperial history and of maintaining a distinct identity for over 2500 years through an often tragic history of foreign invasions and defeats. Iranians are proud of their national language, their amazing literature, and their achievements in science, scholarship, and the arts. The Arabs have a similar justifiable pride in their ancient

civilization, their traditions, and, in particular, their remarkable language in which over a billion people believe that God gave his last and most perfect revelation to man.

In the course of his shuttle diplomacy Luce saw how ethnic and national pride had become a chauvinism that made each side look down on the other and denigrate its achievements and civilization. For many Arabs, the Iranians were descendants of arrogant, luxury-loving fire-worshippers and pagans until the Arabs brought them the enlightened and egalitarian message of Islam. For many Iranians, the Arabs were descendants of the nomads who destroyed the great Iranian civilization of the ancient near east. Iranian Shias add flavour to the dispute by berating their Iraqi brothers about how the people of Kufa betrayed Imam Hossein in his battle with the caliph in 680 CE. Such stereotypes fly in the face of reality, but they persist and continue to exercise their power.

Mutual ignorance compounds the hostility. Despite centuries of interaction and contact, Arabs and Iranians still know little of each other's art, literature, history, politics and traditions. Perhaps a parallel is the relationship between Mexicans and Americans. Many Americans appreciate Mexican food (or a variety of it) and music, but know very little of Mexico's culture and history.

So in this mutual ignorance it is easier to dismiss the others as "liars", "snakes" and "heretics" than make the effort required for understanding. *Ajami*, the usual Arab word for Iranians, is not a compliment. Colloquial Persian's uses of *Arab* are mostly insults.

A DIFFERENT REALITY

It is obvious there are differences and sometimes animosity between Arab and Iranian. The real question is: so what? Those I call instant pundits, and who seek to provide a quick and

simple explanation for problems in today's Middle East, would find that explanation in Arab-Iranian ethnic differences.

Fair enough, but not really. The problem is not that this analysis is wrong. Its weakness is that it misleads. It is simple, but its simplicity distorts more than it clarifies. When we go deeper, we find reality, particularly in this region, is much more complicated and subtle than an easy explanation about Arab-Iranian differences. Once we go beyond such an explanation we discover a truth that is both more complex and more interesting.

ENCOUNTERING THE *KHALIJIS*

My own enlightenment (or my confusion) began on a visit to Dubai in 1973 – as a Foreign Service Officer dealing with the death of an American citizen. Up to that time, my experience had always been with Iran, where I had lived for six years as a high school and university teacher. Now I was encountering the Arab world for the first time.

During that visit, I met Dubaians who at first appearance were UAE Arab citizens. But when they spoke among themselves they used a language I had never heard. It was not Arabic. It was not Urdu. I thought I recognized some Persian words, but wasn't sure. When I asked my friend what language he was speaking, he said, "Oh, that. That's just some local Dubai language." He gave no further explanation and did not welcome further questions.

But I was curious. What I was hearing did not fit what I thought I knew about Arabs living in an Arab country. What I heard did not correspond to my preconceptions. Why were these Dubai Arabs not speaking Arabic among themselves? Although polyglot Dubai merchants had long traditions of overseas trade and shifted easily among English, Arabic, Persian and

Urdu, what I was hearing was something different: a home language spoken among friends and relatives, not something spoken for business.

In the end I had to change my ideas about Arab and Iranian. The fact was that in the Emirates I was not so much in the Arab world as in a larger cultural world that exists on both sides of the Persian Gulf. We should call it neither the Arab world nor the Iranian world but the world of the *Khaliji*, the people of the Gulf.

DISCOVERING THE *KHODEMOONIS*

My inquiries led me on a journey of discovery. It turned out that what I was hearing was the language of a community that is numerous in southern Iran, Dubai, Sharjah, Bahrain and elsewhere on the Arab side of the Persian Gulf. Just how numerous I was to find out later. This community goes by different names, and because the issue is identity, those very names are contentious.

The Arab population refers to this community as *Ajamis*, that is, non-Arab or foreigner (usually Iranian). The Emirati writer Sultan Saud al-Qassimi – who has a genuine personal and scholarly interest in this community and its contributions to UAE society – uses this term without any pejorative meaning.⁵ Community members themselves, however, do not use this term, as it emphasizes their “otherness” and non-Arab identity.

Another term in use is *howla* or *huwala*, which some have interpreted to mean Persianized Arabs. The origins and meanings of this term are obscure. One source writes that the *huwala* were

⁵ See, for example Saud al-Qassimi, “The Ajamis of the Emirates: A Celebrated History,” *The Naked Truth* (15 February 2009). Available online at www.zawya.com/blogs/sultan/090215091333.

...Groups of Sunni Arabs that migrated from Oman and the eastern coast of the Arabian Peninsula to the Iranian side the Gulf, between Bushehr and Bandar Abbas, probably starting in the eighteenth century. They eventually returned to the Arab side, especially after the discovery of oil and the imposition of restrictive economic policies by Reza Shah in the 1930s.⁶

In other words, these people are originally Arabs who migrated to southern Iran and eventually returned to the Arab side. Many members of the *Ajami* community favour this narrative which assigns them Arab origins. A leading Dubai merchant of this community writes:

For a variety of reasons – including climate change, economic pressures, environmental decline, the ebb and flow of politics and war – people from the mainland of Arabia were often obliged to seek a livelihood or security for their families across the Gulf...I still retain the title deeds to the lands which we owned in Dishgaan and Bandar Lingah. The distinctively Arab character of Lingah and of my own background is evidenced by the fact that every one of these deeds is written in Arabic, not Persian.⁷

Another (Wikipedia) source says that the *howla* are actually Arabized Persians who were originally from the northern side of the Gulf. In this version, *howla* is the Arabic plural of *howli*, which is in turn a corruption of Persian *kowli*, meaning gypsy or nomad. This source says they were “a group of wandering Sunni non-Arabs who migrated to the Arabian Peninsula, from the Iranian plateau and Indian subcontinent during the 19th and 20th centuries.”⁸

Most members of the community, however, use a more casual terminology. They refer to themselves and their language as *Khodemooni*, a very colloquial Persian usage that can mean

⁶ Lawrence G. Potter, ed., *The Persian Gulf in History* (New York: Palgrave, 2009), p. 11.

⁷ Easa Saleh al-Gorg, *The Wells of Memory* (London: John Murray, 1998), p. 3.

⁸ Wikipedia, s.v., “HOLA ethnic group,” last modified 18 August 2014, para. 1. Available online at: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/HOLA_\(ethnic_group\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/HOLA_(ethnic_group)).

“among ourselves”, “casual”, “insider”, or just “us”. Although *Khodemooni* seems to be the preferred term, it is very much an insider usage. It rarely appears in the scholarly literature and no Arab writer would use this (non-Arabic) name.

What is this language that its speakers call *khodemooni*? Scholars tell us that it is a “South-western Iranian language” collectively known as Larestani with dialects such as Gerashi and Bastaki. A scholarly article on the subject begins helpfully, “Larestani is spoken in Larestan.”

⁹ Here is a sample of proverbs – both involving donkeys -- in the language.

- *Khoda khar eshnarit ke shakh eshnadit.* “God knew the donkey when he did not give it horns.”
- *Khari ke va piri tarbiyat bebu, bare bazaal-e-qiumat khashe.* “The donkey trained in its old age, will be useful on the battlefield of Armageddon.”¹⁰

Scholars also tell us that Larestani is an “endangered language”. The number of native speakers is declining and it is in danger of becoming a museum display within a few generations. The reasons are understandable. Mobility, intermarriage, and the spread of education, particularly among women, means that younger people increasingly will speak either Arabic or Persian among themselves. This process is reportedly changing Iran’s traditional character as a multi-lingual state. Even the number of Iran’s Azeri speakers – traditionally given as 25-30 percent of the population – has, according to some sources, dropped to around 15 percent.

IDENTITY AND ORGINS

⁹ O.Skjaervo, “Languages of Southeast Iran: Lārestānī, Kumzārī, Baškardī,” in *Compendium Linguarum Iranicarum*, ed. R. Schmitt (Wiesbaden: Reichert, 1989), p.363.

¹⁰ From Ahmad Iqtidari, *My Works*, p. 166.

Who are the *Khodemooni* and where do they come from? That question sounds simple, but as one can see from the disputes over names, we have entered the very sensitive area of identity and identity politics.

Beginning with some basic geography and history: The Iranian plateau and the surrounding mountains and lowlands are divided into three climatic zones based on latitude and elevation. Where water is available, settlement has occurred in a variety of climates, each having a characteristic agriculture and economic life. Most of the major urban centres and agricultural areas of this region are located in the *mo'tadel* ("temperate") zone, at elevations generally between 3,000 and 6,000 feet above sea level.

Shiraz and the smaller towns of Fasa and Neyriz are within this zone. *Mo'tadel* region agriculture includes cultivation of cereals, vegetables, and a variety of fruits including grapes and pomegranates. Since the climate is suited to permanent, settled agriculture, pastoralism is rare in this zone.

The *sardsir* ("coldlands") lie above 6,000 feet in northwest Fars and the highlands of Kerman province around Sirjan. Typical *sardsir* agriculture consists of some cereals, apples, plums, pears and walnuts. This region is often summer quarters for migrating tribes.

The original home of our Arabized Persians or Persianized Arabs – lies in a region called by its Persian-Arabic name, the *garmsirat* ("warm lands"), usually below an elevation of 3,000 feet. This climate is subtropical, and production of cereals gives way to citrus and dates in such regions as Jahrom, Darab, Lar, and further south toward the sea coast.

A HARSH REGION

The *garmsirat* is one of the poorest and most underdeveloped regions of Iran. It is far from the traditional centres of Iranian political and cultural life. In the 1970s, when we lived in Shiraz, getting to Lar – which was just the gateway to the region – meant a boneshaking 12-hour bus trip over unpaved roads. The asphalt ended just 20 kilometres southeast of Shiraz. Iranians called the bus company KLM, a Persian acronym that translates as “the battered backside of the passenger.”

Nature has not been kind to this region. It has long been known for its earthquakes, bad water, poor health, limited agriculture and a brutal summer climate. A 5.5 magnitude earthquake struck the area in January 2014. It was also home to a nasty parasitic worm called in Persian *pyuk*, which we know as the Guinea Worm, spread by contaminated drinking water. Another unfriendly inhabitant was the malaria mosquito. In the decades both before and after the Islamic Revolution, the central government has made serious and largely successful efforts in the region to eradicate these parasites.

History was not kind either. The *garmsirat* has traditionally been an area of simmering anarchy, neglected by Iranian central governments. Because of limited water and the harsh climate, much of the region is better suited to nomadism than to settled agriculture, and the townspeople and peasants have often uneasy relations with the nomads, collectively called *atrak*.

This harsh geography has made the *garmsirat* into one of Iran’s “refuge areas”, a place where – because of its remoteness – unique customs, religions, music, food and languages have

survived. Other such regions inside Iran include the western mountains of Kurdistan and the northern mountains and forests of Mazanderan and Gilan.

In the case of the *garmsirat*, its distinctive culture includes inhabitants who speak the *khodemooni* language described above and who, living in their remote valleys, remained attached to Sunni Islam when most of Iran converted to Shi'ism beginning in the 16th century. While the districts of Lar and Gerash are majority Shia, the regions of Bastak, Khonj, and Evaz, remain majority Sunni.

STAGED MIGRATION

This combination of harsh nature and politics has forced the *garmsiris* to emigrate, sometimes north to Shiraz, but usually southward to the coast, and onward to India and the Arab side of the Gulf. The Larestani scholar Ahmad Iqtidari, writing in 1955, beautifully describes the tragedy of his native region. He dedicates his book *Ancient Larestan*:

To those people of the towns, villages, and ports of Larestan who have stayed in the land of their ancestors, with its glorious past and its desolate present. And to those who have endured the hardship of migration to earn a living on the islands of the Persian Gulf and the Indian Ocean and in the towns of India, Arabia and other places. They remember with joy their beloved birthplace and still grieve for its ruin.¹¹

RECONSTRUCTED HISTORY

In the middle of the 18th century, in the midst of the anarchy and invasions that accompanied the fall of the Safavid dynasty and the death of Nader Shah, the al-Qasimi family of the Arab

¹¹ Ahmad Iqtidari, *Lāristān-i kuhan, darbārah-i Lāristān-i qadīm* (Tehran: افق نداری احمد, 1955), p. 3.

Coast – ancestors of those who have endowed the building of Durham’s own Institute for Middle East and Islamic Studies – took control of Iran’s coast and islands around Bandar Lengeh.

Whoever dominated the Iranian plateau had only minimal authority in that region. In 1779, the Zand rulers of Shiraz and Kerman acknowledged a *fait accompli* and recognized a Qasimi as local ruler (*farmandar*) of Bandar Lengeh. At about the same time the Zands allowed the British East India Company to establish its “residency” in Bushehr.

The Qasimis remained in control of the Bandar Lengeh region until 1887, when they were defeated by the British so called “anti-piracy” campaign. The Qasimis retreated to the southern coast of the Gulf, and their Iranian domains reverted to nominal rule by Tehran. The ruling Qajar dynasty, however, had no ability to control the region, and the real power became the British, acting through the government of India.¹²

The Larestani-speaking, Sunni inhabitants of the interior – in a process about which we have little information – gradually migrated southward to the coast, where they prospered as merchants at Bandar Lengeh under the patronage of the Arab Sunni Qasimis. Driving this migration were the poverty of the interior districts, their chronic insecurity and religious differences with the Shia central government in Tehran. Most of these migrants originated from the region of Bastak, the most important town between Lar and the Gulf coast.

Some of these Bastakis followed the Qasimis across the Gulf after 1887, but many stayed and continued to prosper in Bandar Lengeh’s entrepot and pearling trade, now under British protection. The Iranian side of the Gulf at this time enjoyed the advantage in that, unlike the

¹² After the British defeated the Persians in their brief war of 1856-57, the British resident, who represented the government of India after 1858 and was based on Iranian territory until 1946, gradually became the *de facto* ruler of both sides of the Gulf.

Arab side, there was a hinterland with cities and markets. Such things remained far in the future on the Arab side.

There was another migration after 1903 when the Iranian government – apparently as part of a balancing act between the competing British and Russian interests and to ensure repayment of foreign loans secured by customs receipts (Persia’s major source of revenue in pre-oil days) – established a customs post at Bandar Lengeh. The sources do not say who actually manned this customs office, but, in the disastrous process of the Qajar rulers’ selling off of Iran’s sovereignty, the director-general of Persian customs was Belgian, and many of his officials were foreigners. Qajar authority in that region was shaky, but even that modest action injured the fortunes of Bandar Lengeh and cause further migration of Persian merchants to the Arab side, especially to Dubai.

The major southward migration occurred in the 1930s, in response to Reza Shah Pahlavi’s policies of centralization, conscription, civil status reforms, and, most important, the forced unveiling of women. Reza Shah probably disliked Iran’s Shia clergy as much as did the Bandar Lengeh Sunni merchants, but the latter were so unhappy with his other policies that they packed their businesses, left Iran, and moved across the Gulf. Particularly in Dubai they found a welcome.

TECHNOLOGY TRANSFER

The symbol of their presence in Dubai was the Iranian technology they carried with them – the wind tower, in Persian *baadgir*, in Arabic *barjil*. This is an ancient air-conditioning system that makes life possible in the hot and dry climate of the Iranian plateau. Most of the Iranian cities on the plateau feature these towers, and Yazd, on the edge of the great central desert is especially famous for them. Bastak, the native town of the immigrants, is dry and hot enough for the wind tower technology to work.

When the Bastakis moved south to Lengeh they brought wind towers with them. When they arrived in Dubai they carried the technology and built coral rock homes with this graceful feature attached. In memory of their native region in Iran, they named their district of Dubai *Bastakiya*.

There was only one problem: the wind tower is a superb apparatus in Yazd, Kashan, and Bastak (and theoretically in Arizona) where the hot, dry winds allow for easy and rapid evaporation – and thus cooling. On both coasts of the Persian Gulf– which are famous for their humidity in the summer months – the *badgir* simply will not work. Decorative yes; functional, not very.

In addition to their language and the wind tower, the Bastakis also brought with them a food called *mahiyawa*. It is a very pungent sauce made of fermented fish and spices. Our *khodemooni* friends in Dubai insisted it was a delicacy eaten with fresh Bastaki bread, and used to send us bottles of it. It is an acquired taste.

ASSIMILATION AND DIVERSITY

In Dubai the Al-Maktoum rulers welcomed the newcomers with their wealth and trading skills. They flourished, some in what was euphemistically called Dubai’s “gold trade.” They prospered also in the 1960s and 1970s, thanks to Sheikh Rashid’s open-door commercial policies and his refusal to favour Arabs over others.¹³

Others were not so positive. There was violence against Iranian-origin merchants in 1928 after the British intercepted a boat in the Gulf carrying kidnapped women and children from Dubai to Iran. The British agent at the time – a person of Iraqi origin – was suspected of

¹³ In 1975-76, Sheikh Rashid used to ask the visiting American Ambassador about power cuts and other problems in Abu Dhabi, which, the ruler hinted with a broad grin, were the result of Sheikh Zayed’s employing too many Egyptians and Palestinians.

fomenting this violence and it took British intervention to restore peace. There were further problems from Arab nationalists in the 1950s and 1960s.¹⁴

Many *khodemoonis* were discreet about their origins. Although in Dubai we knew many of the families – Baqer, Saleh, Gorg, Gargash, Galedari, Falaknaz, and Rostamani – we did not understand their numbers until persons whom we had always considered Arabs began seeking visas for their Iranian relatives. A further and tragic reminder came after 1988, after an American warship shot down Iranair 655 with the death of hundreds, mostly Iranian citizens. When the U.S. government sought to pay compensation to families of the dead, we found that many family members of Iranian victims were UAE citizens.

Many of the *khodemoonis* said that, although they were proud of their heritage, they felt little in common with the “northern” Iranians. Such distance was not only a matter of religion. One Dubai merchant told me, “We can operate as far north as Shiraz. That is familiar territory. Above Shiraz is alien to us. When we do business there we inevitably get cheated. The mentality and the manners of the people there are like Persian carpets – too complicated. We have more in common with the Arabs, whom we know. Like us, they are straightforward people, without the complexes and complexities of Tehranis and Isfahanis.”

DEFINING IDENTITY

In the Emirates, the issues of identity and nationality are complex and very sensitive. Complicating the whole issue is the fact that in the cities the local population is a minority (perhaps 20 per cent) among a huge population of foreign workers. To quote one of Muhammad al-Murr’s characters,

It’s an amazing country. The guy who bakes your bread there’s Iranian, the person running the restaurant is Indian, and the carpenter’s Punjabi. The man who irons your clothes is from Madras, the taxi-driver’s Pathan, the electrician’s Pakistani,

¹⁴ Christopher Davidson, *Dubai*, p. 75.

the salesperson's Indian and the nurse who gives you an injection is from Ceylon. We're like ornamental fish or birds: they feed us, clean our pools and cages, and like looking at us. In this country we're just something to look at.¹⁵

In such a setting, how does one define identity in the Emirates? How can one say with certainty who is Arab and who is Iranian?

Many Emiratis are uncomfortable not only with the huge number of foreign residents, but also with the diversity of their own population. They say, "We are all Arabs" and deny that currents from Iran and elsewhere have shaped their society. A few, like the writer Sultan Saud al-Qasimi have embraced diversity. He writes, "...It is high time that we recognize the contributions of the mosaic that forms this young nation. The Emiratis of Asian, Baluch, Zanzibari, Arab and Persian origin make this country what it is today."¹⁶ In 2001 al-Qassimi named his Dubai brokerage firm *Barjeel*, or wind tower, after that distinctly Iranian import to the UAE.

For the Arab compatriots of the *khodemooni* there is ambiguity fed by commercial rivalry, and jealousy complicated by intermarriage.¹⁷ The term the Arab population uses, *Ajami*, implies non-Arab and "other", and suggests that these people are not fully accepted as compatriots.

When the UAE authorities attempt to define identity and nationality they inevitably run into trouble. In Abu Dhabi there seems to be an ongoing issue with Yemeni origins. In Dubai,

¹⁵ Paul Dresch and James Piscatori, eds., *Monarchies and Nations: Globalisation and Identity in the Arab States of the Gulf* (London: I.B Tauris), pp. 139-40.

¹⁶ "The Ajamis of the Emirates: A Celebrated History". *The National*, 15 February 2009.

¹⁷ According to Davidson (personal interview, May 2014), Arab-origin university girls in Abu Dhabi would complain that the natural beauty of their Iranian origins puts girls from Dubai at an advantage in the UAE's competitive marriage market. The Abu Dhabi girls would complain that they needed plastic surgery to compete with their Dubai sisters.

however, there are few worries about Yemeni descent, but often questions about Iranian roots. As Paul Dresch puts it,

In Dubai, however, though certain of the ruling family seem obsessed on occasion with Iranian connections, so many people have Iranian mothers or grandmothers that a sense of threat is hard to inculcate.¹⁸

In other words, attempts to sort out “identity” on the basis of some theoretical Arab origin will, in Dubai at least, crash on the reality that, as befits a maritime and trading society, the Emiratis are a very diverse people.

A DUBAIAN COMPROMISE: MONEY CONQUERS ALL

Most Dubaiians have come to realize that arguing about each other’s origins is, in the end, bad for business. So they have reached a very Dubaiian compromise that allows everyone to profit from an imagined past, be that past Arab or Iranian.

In the late 1980s Dubai’s *Bastakiya* district was a ruin. The ruler’s palace – with a grotesque version of the *badgir* attached -- had already encroached on part of the district. There were plans to bulldoze the whole quarter and put up high-rise offices and apartments. At that time a frustrated Iranian architect in the Dubai municipality told me he couldn’t interest anyone in preservation. He even offered the American government a Bastakiya building rent-free for an office or residence. The problem was that he could not furnish water, electricity or access through the trash-filled alleys.

The original owners had abandoned their wind tower mansions. Those houses still standing had become dormitories for South Asian workers. For many Arab Dubaiians, the *Bastakiya* was not worth preserving. It reminded them of a time when, as one said, “We lived in misery and Iranian merchants lived in luxury.” Reportedly a group of British ladies were planning to sit in front of the bulldozers to stop demolition of the quarter.

¹⁸ Dresch and Piscatori, eds., *Monarchies and Nations*, p. 142.

In the end, the profit motive proved more powerful than Arab or Iranian identity. Enterprising people saw there was money in nostalgia, and in the *Bastakiya* created an imaginary and sanitized Dubai past. Instead of razing the quarter, investors restored it, gentrified it, and made it a “heritage district” with shops, cafes, and a B&B called “Barjil Heritage Guest House.”

One cynical Dubaian friend said about this project: “If this is to be an authentic restoration, they should also reproduce the heat, flies, bad water, and the appalling smells that were part of our everyday lives then. All those things are also our ‘heritage’.”

CONCLUSION: THE TRAP OF IDENTITY

What can we say about being Iranian or Arab in this world? First, these are complex relationships and categories that defy clear distinctions such as “Arab vs. Persian” or “Shia vs. Sunni”. Forty-five years ago, Sir William Luce found himself caught among the myths, stereotypes and grievances real and imagined that bedevilled this relationship and made his mission so complicated.

Second, everyone in the Gulf faces questions about identity. At the end of the day, what does it mean to be “Arab” or “Iranian”? Traditionally the answer was easier for Iranians, who have a strong tradition of multi-ethnic empire. A person could speak one of dozens of languages at home and practice different religions and still be as Iranian as anyone else. The Persian-speaking Jews of Kashan and the Turkish-speaking Shia Muslims of Ardabil were equally Iranian. The situation is different for some inhabitants on the Arab side of the Gulf, however, where the whole idea of ethnic and linguistic diversity is unsettling.

I have discussed the *Ajamis*, or *Huwala*, or *Khodemoonis* with their endangered language, wind-towers, and powerful fish sauce. This community typifies the basic question about identity in the UAE: By what criteria do you assign it?

Are the *khodemoonis* Iranians? By language and by geographic origins they are. But their unique history and experiences even within Iran separates them from the mainstreams of Shia Iranian life in places like Isfahan, Tehran, Mashhad, or Tabriz. As my *khodemooni* friend said: “We are at home as far north as Shiraz. Beyond that we are foreigners.”

Are they Arabs? Some, like the wealthy merchant I quoted earlier, have created Arab pedigrees for themselves and many prefer the name *Huwala* because it implies Arab peoples returning to their origins. Their UAE passports make them citizens of an Arab country, although those who lack the family book tracing origins (*khulsat al-qaid*) complain that they do not receive the full range of services from the UAE government.

To end where we began – with Sir William Luce in this Gulf cultural world. What he saw --- Arab-Iranian hostility and the Shah’s curled lip -- were real. But, as always, when we look deeper there is a more complicated and more interesting story. The peoples living near the Persian Gulf, both north and south, have much that unites them. They have a rich culture that includes Arab, Iranian, Indian and African traditions. As maritime people living by trade, they were always open to outside influences. A better name than “Arab” or “Iranian” may be *Khaliji* – people of the Gulf whose identity is a powerful blend of cultures and whose symbol is the graceful wind-tower -- that most Iranian of inventions that Arabian Dubai has chosen to advertise itself to the world.

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